

Hello, my name is Doug Norman, and I'm a musician in the LouisvilleKY area.

I've recently been fortunate enough to have my band's first CD "picked up" by one of our local radio stations. I'm told that about four songs off this CD are currently receiving airplay. Most of my friends are also musicians, and many of them also receive airplay on various local stations.

The station that's currently giving us airplay is our local public radio station, but several of my friends' bands are also being played on local commercial radio stations. Our local public radio station (WFPK) makes a concerted effort to showcase local material, and I'm told there are "all local" shows airing weekly on various other commercial stations in our market.

I think it's good that we have programming content that reflects the "local character," and wish our local radio stations would move more in this direction. I would certainly WOULDN'T want to see radio go the way of fast food, with "standardized product" across all markets. I think radio (more so than television) is uniquely poised to reflect the surrounding community via its programming and on-air personalities, and that this gives it a "personalized" feel -- that you can call up and request a song, hear a comment about a local artist or some upcoming event, or perhaps hear some obscure oldie that's relevant to one's local area. When radio goes to "satellite services," all this region-specific flavor is lost.

I think that if the FCC defines local programming, it should include music as well as talk and call-in programming (we're fortunate in Louisville to have an abundance of all of these). I suppose "local" would have to be taken to mean unique to a single broadcast market, or programming that is carried only by a single station, or regional group of affiliated broadcasters (I'm thinking of the news stories I often hear which are attributed to "Kentucky Public Radio" as a good example of this).

News, "public affairs" programming, local sports coverage (high school, college), local live-music programming -- even radio that simply plays local records -- all these are good examples of radio that reflects the character of its environment, all these should be taken into consideration when defining "local content."

Stations that become participants in local fund-raising activities and provide coverage of these events are serving their community in the strictest sense by using their "bully pulpits" to champion these causes, and give them a greater profile in the community than they would be able to achieve on their own. It's one thing to sponsor a local event and get your station logo on the event's banner, but it's quite another to have local on-air talent who can "talk the event up," at every opportunity, and who can provide "live remote" coverage from the event. This kind of programming is far more valuable than simply drafting a spot promoting the event, and dropping it into the "insert local programming here" slot allotted by some satellite content provider.

As to "national content," I've been disturbed by news stories I've been hearing that sounds as though "Payola" has been making a comeback -- that local/regional programmers are taking payment for a guaranteed degree of airplay. This puts large corporations at a larger advantage than they already enjoy, and stifles anything that can't match their deep pockets. Local programming will necessarily suffer in an environment where

programmers can turn a profit by playing some artist paid for by a major label. (If this is allowed to continue, perhaps stations should be required to disclose that this is going on, as in the case of the "approval" clause in political ads -- "here's ANOTHER Britney Spears song, and it's being brought to by a grant from A&M RECORDS!" (or whatever label she's on). Perhaps if the listening public were made aware of how much of what they hear is a result of payments made as with advertising, they might reconsider whether they really want to hear it.

Disclosure might also make a difference in the widespread use of "voice-tracked" programming by satellite providers. This issue concerns me in that there have been incidents such as a chemical spill that wasn't reported on local radio stations because there wasn't somebody at the station to "break the news." When radio reaches this level of standardization, its degree of "community service" becomes questionable -- it becomes more like an "audio magazine," available on your local newsstand, and on newsstands across the country, bought and paid for, but reflecting nothing of the community in which it exists.

If there are to be national playlists, I think they should be a reflection of that which has succeeded at the local level, and by "local," I don't mean just New York City and Los Angeles. What is chosen for national airplay should be a reflection of what's succeeded at the local & regional level, much as with sports playoffs.

The particular era of music that fascinates me is what's come to be known as the "Nuggets" era, (after the box set of the same name). After the original payola scandal, American radio was a rich environment, full of local artists who successfully competed against national acts, at least in their home city, or state, or a two- or three-state region they played in. If they caught the attention of a major label, they might make it to the national level; however, the quality of the music made by the bands that didn't "make it big" is often just as good as that which did make it. The upshot of all this is that "localism" in radio can be seen to be "The Great Democratizer," in that any bunch of high school kids who can scrape together enough to make a record have a shot at national stardom, IF the record's good enough to succeed on its own merits. If it's merely a reflection of how much money has been put behind it, it's little more than a two-minute, thirty-second classified a
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The rise of low power FM radio offers communities the sort of variety one typically finds currently on the Internet. If I may make another reference to a historical precedent, this could possibly influence what gets carried on commercial radio in much the same way that the British "pirate" stations like Radio Caroline eventually forced the BBC to carry more and better popular music. Perhaps local amateur broadcasters themselves might come up with some little program or call-in show that garners enough interest and publicity that might be picked up by a local station. Again, that which is good will rise and succeed on its own merit, not by virtue of the quantity of money it has backing it.

To conclude, I think it's important for radio to contain a strong local "flavor" if it is to remain relevant, and that it serves a vastly broader function as a reflection of the community it exists in than it does if it acts merely as a conduit for big-money interests on the national level. Thanks for reading this, and I hope the FCC's decisions on "local

programming" will be such that radio continues to serve the public interest by "keeping it local."

Doug Norman